

Are we caring for our children?

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The Welsh Agenda, December 2016

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Since devolution, there has been a strong child-centred approach to policy making by successive Welsh governments, but according to a number of children's charities, in recent years there has been a lack of vision and leadership, which the Children's Commissioner for Wales says jeopardises children and young people's outcomes. This is evident in childcare policies where economic considerations have increasingly replaced a focus on children's overall developmental needs.

During the 2016 Welsh Assembly election campaign we saw an unprecedented focus on childcare, with Labour forming a government having promised '30 hours free childcare a week for the working parents of three and four year olds, 48 weeks of the year'. While the offer will be welcomed by parents of young children across Wales, the policy commitment raises a number of important questions.

First, the policy is focused on the relatively short-term economic gains that come with increasing women's employment through providing care for children when they are working. Access to paid work has traditionally been seen as the single best guarantor of family welfare. Policies to increase the affordability and availability of childcare therefore aspire to alleviate child poverty, reduce welfare dependence and increase tax revenues. Increasing the labour supply of underemployed women is seen to have benefits for the economy as a whole and, it is argued by some, also promotes gender equality.

However, in recent years, the rise of in-work poverty has challenged this simple assumption. A 2015 report by Aleks Collingwood for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that working families in Wales are at greater risk of poverty now than they were a decade ago, with part-time working households – most likely to be those trying to balance work and caring responsibilities – at greatest risk. Simply increasing childcare is on its own is unlikely to be effective in achieving economic goals or tackling poverty. Yet there is national and international research evidence suggesting that providing publicly supported, high quality learning and developmental opportunities and care to young children creates significant opportunities to prevent and alleviate child poverty (for example, John Bennett and Collette Tayler's 2006 report for the OECD: *Starting strong II: Early childhood education and care*). Over the longer term an integrated package of quality care and early learning promotes young children's intellectual development, leading to better educational outcomes and life chances overall. Yet there is little consideration of these longer-term goals within recent childcare policy in Wales.

It also remains to be seen whether the political promise to support increasing economic independence and aspirations of families can be delivered with the current infrastructure of childcare provision in Wales. Most three and four-year-old children in Wales currently receive either part-time or full-time Foundation Phase early learning in schools, therefore we do not have in Wales a large, established independent childcare sector to step up and provide more childcare. Even in England, where early education is predominantly delivered by a market of private and voluntary childcare providers, a similar increased offer is proving difficult to deliver. The increased childcare offer is also being considered during a period of uncertainty for the sector where austerity, increasing employment costs and changing regulatory demands challenge the sustainability of existing daycare for preschool children and the after-school and holiday childcare that working parents of older children often rely upon.

The solution in many areas of Wales is likely to be in developing childcare that ‘wraps around’ existing Foundation Phase provision in schools, yet the ability of schools to deliver this themselves is untested. Some do not have the physical space, while others lack the willingness. Schools often see themselves as providing education and not care. This also highlights a more fundamental question as to whether primary schools, as they currently exist, are the best places for children to be spending their earliest years. A recent review (Siraj, 2014) commissioned by Welsh Government concluded that there are considerable weaknesses in Foundation Phase, the successful delivery of which should provide the greatest support and improve the long-term life chances for children, particularly those living in poverty. Finally, a consequence of increasing childcare for three and four-year-olds in schools will inevitably be a decrease in childcare for the under-threes. The relatively small number of childminders and day nurseries in Wales that parents currently rely upon will struggle to survive if more children are cared for in schools. Furthermore, pre-school playgroups and *cylch meithrin* that currently offer valuable pre-school experiences in local communities will close. This could be particularly damaging in rural areas that have suffered from the closure of village schools. Transport for pre-school children is not provided by most local authorities.

The promise to provide an offer of 30 hours free childcare might provide the opportunity to address these key questions. It is certainly an opportunity to examine the current split system of education and care and develop services to enable children to access more high quality early learning, and make working parents’ lives easier. In 2014, Welsh Government commissioned an independent review of childcare structures to determine whether they are truly fit to efficiently and effectively support high quality early childhood education and care. We made a clear recommendation for systemic change that brings together the sometimes competing needs of the parent to work and the child’s care and education. The review recommended an overhaul of the current system to reduce the tension between the disparate systems of care and education in Wales. It stressed the need for a simplified offer that focused on the needs of the child, determining that a piecemeal offer to get parents back into work would be detrimental to children. Positive outcomes, we concluded, rely on a high quality system of early childcare education and care within a cohesive regulatory framework.

Yet despite these recommendations, Welsh Government continue to support separate regulatory systems for childcare and education, with a crossover that sees some 700 settings in Wales subject to both. Childcare providers report that attempts to streamline and integrate the two systems are chaotic and overly bureaucratic. It is clear that a strategy for structural reform is needed to allow for managed evolution of provision to protect the rights of all children across the early years sector and to prevent undermining ongoing quality improvement in the sector. This includes the work of the Care Council for Wales in relation to qualification development and regulatory change intended to bring about greater consistency and improvement in quality. Almost everyone agrees that increased support for early childhood is welcome but the short-term need for low cost, high quantity provision to support parents’ work should not be paid for by denying children high quality integrated early childhood education and care that evidence shows can have significant longer-term social and economic impact.